



Yugoslav Short Films

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Yugoslav Short Films

Contrary to the situation in most countries there is, in Yugoslavia, a place for the short film. This is not on television or in the art houses, but in theaters, showing along with the regular feature. The demand is so great, and the quality so high, that it is not necessary to import shorts from abroad. The industry makes only about 15 features a year, and therefore must import an average of 150—half of which are American—but this year it will make well over one *thousand* short films.

The categories are the same as in most countries: documentaries and educational; children's pictures; the entertainment "featurette," and the animated short. A difference is the grouping: there will be almost 900 documentaries; a dozen films for children; usually less than 52 newsreels; and only 20 cartoons. The cartoons are best known abroad but the home audience is much more familiar with the documentaries. One distributor smiled and said: "The cartoons? Oh, you must go abroad to see them."

The documentaries are ubiquitous though—on the whole—better than those of most countries. One of the reasons is, I think, that the Yugoslavs had to develop their own style. Their feature film is sometimes indebted to foreign models (Renoir has had a beneficial influence; the average English or American all-talkie a pernicious one) but the short films have had no foreign mentors. One of the results is a kind of freedom. The Yugoslavs have not seen *Berlin* and *Rien que les Heures*; they have never read Rotha or Grierson, and they do not know *Night Mail* from the *Daily Mail*.

This freedom leads occasionally to home movies: ski-meets in Bled, poorly photographed; the life of the bald eagle in which most of the footage is spent in merely getting up the Macedonian mountains. And there is occasional "commercialism": lovely Dubrovnik—and it is lovely—seen entirely through the watercolors of

some moderately talented local artist. But, more often, the freedom from influence results in a style which is both simple and strong.

Boatmen on the Drina (*Sblavari na Brni*, Bosna-film, Sarajevo), though in no way the best of recent documentaries, shows the approach. Given the subject, the life of the boatmen on a particularly unruly river, the director took numerous rides with them on their log rafts, trying to get the feel of the experience. He decided that he did not want the loggers dwarfed by the high canyon walls since he himself did not feel dwarfed, and so he cut out all overhead shots. He even left out the bridge at Višegrad, famous since its appearance in the Andric novel. The bumpiness impressed him and so he increased the effect by hand-holding his camera. Nights on the river, the rafts either drifting along in the broader stretches or anchored in a cove off the rapids, impressed him and these he intercut in the most natural manner, alternating night and day until the mouth of the river was reached. When the sea was reached the film was ended—a documentary by no means great but consistently honest.

Like most Yugoslav documentaries it was free of the omnipotence of a Dziga-Vertov, the cozy picturesqueness toward which the *Kunst* film

WOOD SCULPTURE IN MACEDONIA.



tends, and the inverse snobbery ("the noble boatmen doing their job") of the usual British or American product. It was simply a boat trip and its simplicity evolved from the idea that it was, after all, only a documentary.

The educational film, on the other hand, often has an ax to grind, though here too, as one producer told me: "We do not know enough to be tricky." A film showing the elements of geometry is done (simple stop-frame animation on a blackboard) with a starkness which most other countries would not inflict on a film-strip; a film on traffic regulations is composed of just that: numerous traffic regulations; a film on good manners merely shows everyone behaving properly. Indeed, in Yugoslavia, the educational film is definitely intended to educate.

More often, however, the approach is oblique, and any message involved is to be inferred. This is particularly true of art films, even a know-your-country art film. *Wood Sculpture in Macedonia* (*Mijacki Drovorezbari*, Bosna-film, Sarajevo) is the simple examination of thousands of tiny carved figures in a single mosque. There is no visible commentator, just the magnifying lens and, at the end, a single backward dolly to show the entire room. *Children of the World* (*Deca ovog Sveta*, Bosna-film, Sarajevo) uses children's drawings from the major countries, has each explained by a child in his original language, and frames the film with a simple story of a little Yugoslav girl going to an exhibition of children's drawings.

THE MISSING PENCIL.



Children's films are equally uncomplicated and *The Missing Pencil* (*Izugubljena Olovka*, Zora-film, Zagreb) is a thoroughly enchanting example of the genre at its best. A little boy, anxious—like most Yugoslav little boys—to get ahead, rather alienates his teacher. He always has his lesson done before the others; he seems to be asking for special attention. When a pencil is lost—and in the poverty-stricken hinterlands of Yugoslavia the loss of a pencil is serious—the teacher blames the child. He fights against this injustice but finally gives in to it, says that he took the pencil. At the climax of the film, a Christmas party with the teacher dressed as Santa Claus, he is so confused that he can no longer tell truth from falsehood. By the time the pencil is found, honesty has been so punished and deception so rewarded that he is well on his way toward becoming an habitual liar. But he is a brave little boy, and a smart one. Only when the teacher explains does he finally, for the first time, allow himself to cry.

The film is essentially ironic but entirely direct. Parallels with the adult situation are revealed but not stressed. The little boy does not represent lost innocence or anything of the sort. He is, in fact, quite responsible for his own difficulties. Yet the power of the film is that one feels strongly for the child. And the reason that one does is that one's sympathy has not been directly requested. Honesty and simplicity are enough to win the viewer over entirely.

Simplicity, like good intentions, however, is not always enough. The feature films sometimes betray an innocence of technique and a simplicity of imagination which is not good, and the same is true of the "featurette." There are exceptions, however. *The Sister* (*Patronazna Sestra*, Triglav-films, Ljubljana) is an interesting experiment. It is about a young social worker, and the camera follows her about during one day's visits. In so doing it shows the worst conditions within the country: poverty, alcoholism, prostitution—social evils to which Yugoslavia does not often admit. Shot almost entirely on actual locations, the film says that such things exist but at the same time suggests

that they will not always exist. This is done by purposely destroying synchronization between sound and image. We see the social worker and we watch conversations none of which we hear; the soundtrack carries only her own thoughts, and hopes.

The work of brothers (Bogdan Pogacnik wrote and Joze Pogacnik directed) the picture indicates something of a new direction for the Yugoslav film. It is now possible to make a picture critical, if hopeful. Further, the film obtained an export license, though because of distribution difficulties (Zagreb sees mainly Zagreb-made films, Beograd, those made in Beograd, etc.) it aroused little interest.

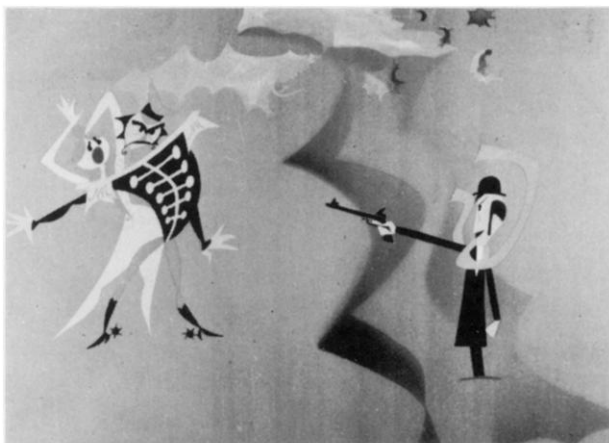
The picture had social intent, which is perhaps the reason it was allowed to be made. Films intended to be merely entertaining have more trouble. One of the most brilliant shorts I saw was *Pusher* (*Lakat Kao Takav*, Zagreb-film, Zagreb), a satire about getting ahead in the world. The opening scene shows a pair of twins, just born. There is a slow dissolve to the twins a bit later; one takes the bottle from the other and knocks him down. Later we see them (played by adult men) as schoolboys. One steals the other's lesson—the teacher punishes the innocent. Later the downtrodden one is sent to a possibly governmental clinic where elbows are strengthened. He graduates with honors—his elbow test is of the highest. He at once goes out, elbows his brother out of the way, and continues on right to the top. The film has great style, also elegance and wit. It is shot against enormous white cycloramas, and all props and costumes are black. The score comments on the situation and the acting is pantomime in the grand style.

Yet the film is relatively unknown. Antun Babaja, who directed it, is known abroad for his *Disagreement* (*Nesporazum*) a very wry and funny satire about what happens when an ordinary millstone gets exhibited in a modern art gallery, but he remains neglected within Yugoslavia—perhaps because his pictures are not “constructively” socially conscious, a fault in a socialist country.

Yet, interesting entertainment shorts are made. One of the most interesting is *The Other Side of the Street* (*Na Solncni Strani Ceste*, Triglav-films, Ljubljana), directed by a very young film-maker named Matjaz Klopčič. There is no story and the director's interest is almost entirely in technique. The film is about an old man who makes his living by cutting silhouettes on the town bridge, and it shows what he does every day. The subject could not be more dull and yet the picture is captivating. The images are very freely cut together, there is no concern for continuity since there is no story to be told, and the only commentary is that of modern jazz on the soundtrack. The approach is very casual and yet not frivolous—as the same technique has been in, say, the films of Godard—and perhaps part of one's delight in the picture is that it is so completely unostentatious, and that its only purpose is to entertain.

This, of course, the Yugoslavian cartoons do superlatively well. Those of Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland—not to mention those of England or America—cannot touch them. Here one finds all of the imagination and technical prowess that the Yugoslav feature film frequently lacks. One of the reasons is the relative youth of the cartoon industry. It is only 10 years old and has only been producing films in any number since 1955 when Zagreb-film set up a studio to house the unit. Another reason is the youth of those on the staff. There is no one more than 40 and the majority are about 30. Finally, and most important, most are refugees from feature production.

The way that features are made in Yugoslavia is this: a script is written and approved, but it must be approved by two boards. Each film company has its own management board and this is both controlled and neutralized by a workers' council, which is—naturally—controlled by the management board. The mutual check is always insisted upon. If the boards agree on a certain script then it is made into a film. After it is finished it is viewed and it may or may not be released, though the vast majority are. Though the system would seem fair enough, it



Top, OSTVETNIK; bottom, JAJE.

manages to discourage the rare creative voice that wants something the majority does not. Both boards are representative of the people: the workers' council members are elected, and those in management are obtained through selection. Yet, because of this, it is rare indeed that any film with intellectual or aesthetic pretensions is passed—or even offered, for that matter. The answer I usually received when I asked about this was: "What is the problem? What we want to show the people want to see. What they want to see we show." The writer or director is absolutely free, it was maintained, because "he must satisfy the people, and since he is one of the people he satisfies himself." The dilemma is complete and the Yugoslavian feature film suffers thereby.

The cartoon industry, on the other hand, has

no such supervision. Artists, writers, and directors work in the most apparent freedom. Since the very nature of their medium insures popular approval they are not harassed by boards. And, consequently, it is here that one finds lightness, wit, irony, satire—all qualities for which one looks in vain in the average feature production.

Another reason for the excellence of the cartoons is that each has its own director. He works in harmony with the artist and the writer and together a visual style is decided upon. But he remains the director and the picture is his responsibility. This is unfortunately not true in the cartoon factories of other countries.

At the same time, writers, directors, even designers, are constantly changing positions. One picture's director may be the next picture's writer. Since the entire staff is self-taught and most came in originally as designers, each can do several jobs. Far from creating tension, this makes for the best possible working conditions, and further lends a fluidity which is very rare in the film world.

For this reason the Yugoslav cartoon has no "house" style—as does Disney, or even UPA. Graphically, all are antinaturalist and antitraditional. If the French do it one way, and the Russians the other, that makes two excellent arguments for doing it neither way.

Yet the Yugoslav cartoons do have some style elements common to them all. All are without dialogue, and all are accompanied by a synchronized musical score. This score is usually written before the film is created, the composer, director, writer, and designer all working together. The former already knows the story and so his music is composed with it in mind. But its cadences, its general tempo, even its length, is of his own choice. The music is initially the most important ingredient in the film; it becomes the base upon which all else rests. This is one of the reasons why the structure of Yugoslav cartoons is so strong. It is a musical structure, and music by its nature cannot help but be a formal art.

The score is recorded and then carefully stud-

ied by writer, director, and designer. Bit by bit they build the cartoon above it, the music always determining the action. Consequently the score often determines the success of the film as a whole. The delightful *Piccolo*, a cartoon about two neighbors competing with various musical instruments, rests on Brandimir Sakac's completely apposite score. *The Inspector Returns Home* (*Inspektor se Vraca Kuci*), however, despite some fascinating visuals (a collage effect using real textures: cloth, metal, torn still photographs), was just as slow and dull as was its score.

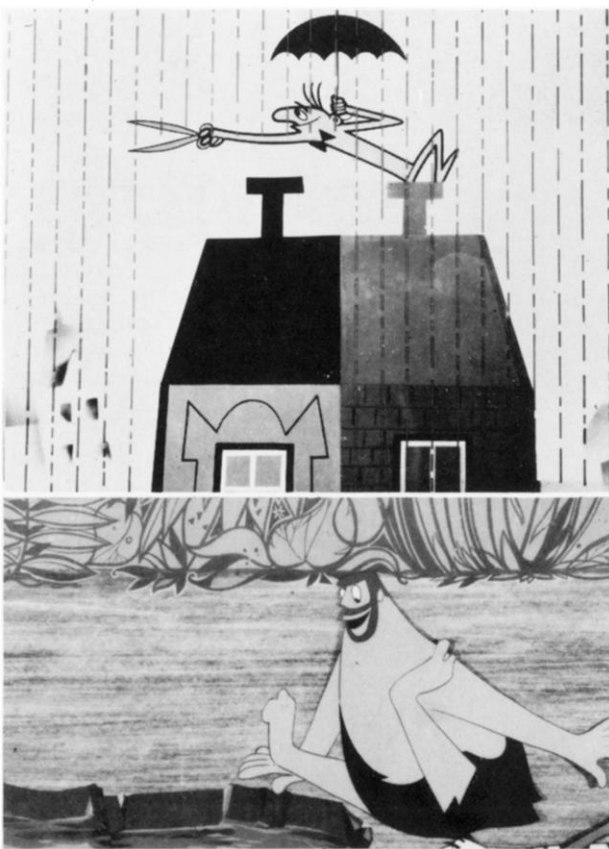
The visual style is purposely, almost arrogantly simple. The Yugoslavs are about the last cartoonists left who realize that action is everything and consequently their style is athletic—there is not a frill or a bit of prettiness to be seen. Sooner or later every line inside the frame will be used. Sometimes, as in *All the Drawings of the Town* (*Svi Crtezi Grada*), the style of children is imitated. At other times, as in the cartoon version of *La Peau de Chagrin* (*Sagrenska Koza*), the style is purposely sophisticated. *The Egg* (*Jaje*) relies upon a “funny” cartoon style—everything is caricatured. For *The Revenge* (*Osvetnik*), however, with its Maupassant story, the style becomes nearly expressionist. All share in common, however, a visual vitality which only true simplicity can give.

The themes, likewise, vary. There is no continuing character—though Cowboy Jimmy, a hilarious parody of what most foreigners think the American cowboy to be, shows signs of becoming one. Likewise, the film-makers fully believe that cartoons are for adults and that they are not merely curtain-raisers for the feature. Consequently the Yugoslav cartoon treats adult subjects: love, war, ambition, envy—even death. These, however, are treated in a consistently satirical manner. Of last year's output over a third were out-and-out satires and even those labeled adaptations or filmed stories had a healthy amount of social comment, usually barbed. *Romeo and Juliet* (*Romeo i Julija*) showed lovers through the ages, each age funnier than the one before, and the funniest of all

was modern Yugoslavia. *All Because of a Plate* (*Zbog Jednog Tanjura*) takes a situation which feature films have seriously treated, newly-weds and their efforts to get started in a land of housing shortages, and makes outrageous fun of it. More often, however, the cartoons are directed against modern life in general. *The All-Round Helper* (*Djevojka za Sve*) is a perfect parable for modern times: a scientist constructs a robot who will do all of his work for him; an ordinary horseshoe gets into the works and the robot turns. The last scene shows the scientist finally pursued to outer space and caught. It is now his turn to serve the robot. *Happy End* is even stronger. At the conclusion everyone is blown up.

Among those many who have made the Yugoslavian cartoon what it is, of most importance is Dušan Vukotic, who invented Cowboy Jimmy;

Top, PICCOLO; bottom, ROMEO I JULIJA.

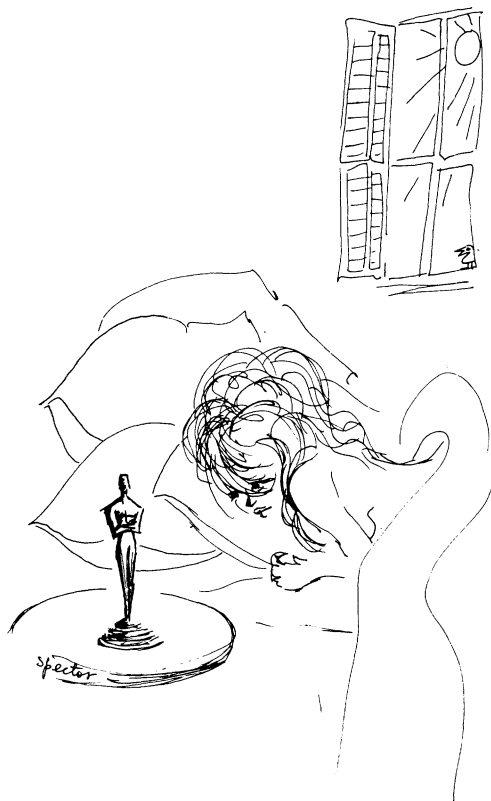


Vatroslav Mimica, responsible for *Happy End*; Nikola Kostelac, who did *All Because of a Plate*; and Aleksander Marks, the chief designer and the most responsible for the visual finish of the Zagreb cartoons. It is they who have largely made these what they are and who have somehow kept the quality of an excellence almost unique.

It is even more surprising that this could be done when one realizes that the cartoon studio—unlike any other film studio in Yugoslavia—is entirely self-financed. Most studios are helped from time to time. There is a central monopoly on film and cameras and it is a rare individual who buys his own film or his own camera. From the first, however, the cartoonists were independent and they have remained so, supporting

themselves largely because they can take in job assignments (at present they are doing a series of advertisements for an American concern) and because their films have sold well abroad. And they have been able to retain their freedom, despite occasional complaints of “intellectualism,” because people like cartoons.

As with the other short films of Yugoslavia, however, the strength of the cartoons lies in their originality, the fact that they had no foreign models, and in their honesty. Like the documentaries, their simplicity is their strength, but, unlike them, they also have lightness, wit, and real elegance. The Yugoslavian feature-film industry could learn much from its own short subjects.



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